

Education the best way to fight human trafficking, police

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A 2014 RCMP report found 93 per cent of sex trafficking victims in this country are Canadian.

Dick believes education is the most important tool to fight human trafficking— even before enforcement. That's educating teens, teachers, parents, social workers, medical professionals, even hotel staff to recognize the signs.

The unit has also focused on training its own front line officers to be on the lookout for possible human trafficking victims.

The strong belief that education is the most powerful tool to fight human trafficking is echoed by Joy Smith, former member of Parliament and founder of the Joy Smith Foundation, which focuses on funding front-line organizations and education around human trafficking.

The foundation just launched a public awareness campaign video called #ShesNotForSale. It shows a man walking down a hallway

in a seedy building. "Thailand?" flashes across the screen. Then "Russia? Malaysia? India?" and so on. The man arrives at a door and finds a young girl sitting on the bed and approaches. Then "Canada."

The video is meant to drive home the fact that most sex trafficking victims in Canada are Canadian girls.

"It's happening in every community in our country and people are not talking about it," Smith says.

Jessica Pennock was born in B.C. and then moved with her upper-middle class family to Winnipeg when she was 10. She was bullied and felt alone, so she started to hang out at a recreation centre.

There she says she was tricked into trying crack cocaine, became addicted and moved in with who she thought was her boyfriend. At just 15 he started selling her for sex. She never saw any money.

"He was a master manipulator," Pennock says.

She was then trafficking in To-

ronto, sold from one predator to another.

Pennock says she felt hopeless and too afraid to go to police, so she jumped off a bridge. She didn't die, but broke her back. But it was only later when she became pregnant that she sought help.

Now Pennock, who is in her second year of college, says she feels compelled to share her story and raise awareness about the issue, including promoting #ShesNotForSale and the Joy Smith Foundation.

"Education is the greatest weapon," she says, adding that had she known what was happening to her she may have been able to stop it.

Pennock and Smith warn parents and others to be on the lookout for young girls who suddenly start getting lavish gifts or clothes, but can't explain where they're coming from, girls who run away or those who suddenly have older friends they don't want anyone else to meet. Girls who have their identification taken away. Are withdrawn, isolated.



Halton Police say human trafficking is happening all over Canada, with 93 per cent of victims being Canadian. File Photo

"These girls have to know it's not their fault ... we're trying to change the channel in this country," Smith says.

Largely because of population size, the greater Toronto-Hamilton area is considered a hotbed for the activity, particularly along the major highway corridors where pimps frequently move their victims from hotel to hotel.

But many police, including Dick, believe the problem isn't necessarily growing, it's just finally being uncovered with the addition of dedicated human trafficking units.

"It's not more of a problem. It's like anything else, the more resources you put at looking at a problem the more you will find," he says.

It may be surprising for some to see that Halton has laid so many human trafficking charges over the last couple of years.

"It's quite a lot for a region of this size," Dick says. "The safest large municipality in Canada."

But it is also a community with money.

"Wherever there are people, wherever there's money, there are young, exploited women," he says.

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